

A Historical Distinction and Continuing Legacy: The Navy Promotes its First Male Nurse Flag Officer

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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Date: 10.02.2020

Posted: 10.02.2020 13:58

News ID: 380112

On October 1, 2020, Capt. Eric Peterson was promoted to Rear Admiral from his home in Appleton, Wisconsin, becoming the Navy's newest flag officer as well as the first male ever to achieve this rank in the Nurse Corps.

As a flag officer, Peterson will serve as the Deputy Commander, Naval Medical Forces Atlantic and the Deputy Director Nurse Corps, Reserve Component.

Peterson's journey to this distinction began in May 1988 when he enlisted in the North Dakota Army National Guard. He served as a combat medic for three and a half years before exploring a career in nursing.

His own family history, and deep reflection on the "service and sacrifice" of his grandparents in World War II, inspired his entry into the uniformed services.

Peterson was born in Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy while his father was stationed there with the Coast Guard. The Peterson family later relocated to North Dakota where his father was commissioned as a combat engineer with the Army National Guard.

From an early age entering the field of medicine was always a desire for Peterson. After EMT training and his time as an enlisted medic he entered the Navy Nurse Corps Candidate Program, gaining his commission in February 1994.

On his first day at Naval Medical Center San Diego in 1994 he met with the Director of Nursing Services who acknowledged that he expressed an interest in working the Emergency Department. She then told him, "We'll let you do it and see how it goes."

Peterson found everyone to be welcoming of the newly commissioned ensign and eager to share their knowledge. From those first days working the Emergency Department to now he credits many mentors for helping to guide and shape his career and showing him the true example of clinical excellence and leadership, while maintaining humility.

First and foremost, each of these mentors placed an emphasis on the team. "They each had a genuine concern for the individual and who they are working with," said Peterson. "They all excelled at working with people and the team and serving as the engine leading that team."



This notion of team work would again play a significant role his career during two separate deployments to Afghanistan.

In 2010, Peterson deployed to the NATO Role III Multinational Medical Unit in Kandahar, Afghanistan during the troop surge. He was one of five individuals to stay for a 13 month deployment during what was a challenging period in the hospital's history. Four years later he returned to the Role III for a 10-month deployment.

For Peterson, these experiences have shaped his leadership philosophy—leaders must motivate people to strive for a common goal.

"It also showed me up close and personal, the sacrifices our warfighters make for our country," said Peterson "It reinvigorated me to ensure they had all the support and best medical care they needed so we could get them home to their families."

Peterson's distinction as the first male nurse flag officer in the Navy is, in many respects, par for the course for the Navy Nurse Corps which has long had a tradition of notable Navy firsts.

In 1908, 20 individuals were selected by the Bureau of Medicine and Surgery (BUMED) to represent the first members of the Nurse Corps. These pioneers—forever after known as the "Sacred Twenty"—hold the distinction as the first women in the Navy.

Over the next decades these pioneers, and those that followed them, earned distinctions as the first women in the Navy to serve overseas and aboard ships. In World War II Navy nurses were granted official rank and would make history again by becoming the first women to serve in active combat theaters. In the 1970s, members of the Nurse Corps—some of them veterans of World War II—became the first women to achieve flag rank in the Navy.

Until August 1965, the Navy Nurse Corps was exclusively comprised of women. That year former hospital corpsman George Silver became the first male to obtain a commission in the Nurse Corps. He was followed soon after by Lt (j.g.) Jerry McClelland, and Ensigns Charles Franklin, Isadore Miller, and Richard Gierman.

In January 1968, Lieutenant Clarence Cote became the first male nurse in the Regular Navy; 17 years later he became the first male nurse to serve as a commanding officer of a Medical Treatment Facility (MTF). Other firsts followed in 2006 when Captain Albert Shimkus became the first male Navy nurse to serve at the helm of a hospital ship MTF (USNS Comfort).

Admiral Peterson shies away from talk of historical distinctions and instead prefers to champion the important role the Navy Nurse Corps has—and continues to play—in showing a diversity of thought, opinion, leadership and talent over its 112-year history.

"This is our strength, in the Nurse Corps, Navy Medicine and Navy as a whole," said Peterson. "The honor and privilege of being selected to represent and lead such a group of talented professionals is immeasurable."

Despite his new role, Peterson's career goals as a Navy nurse has never changed and at their core have always been about working as part of a team and serving others.

"I had always wanted to make a career of the military," said Peterson. "I did not have any intentions or thoughts about rank or positions. Throughout my career I just wanted to be able to help people."